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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

The Military Decision Making Process and the Battle of the Little Bighorn

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By

Jonathan T. Neumann
Major, U.S. Army
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Mentor: Dr. Donald F. Bittner, Professor of History

Approved: _____

Date: _____

Mentor: Lieutenant Colonel Michael M. Weber, USMC

Approved: _____

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Abstract <p>The purpose of this paper is to analyze the mission assigned to Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong and his 7th Cavalry Regiment at the Little Bighorn, and to develop courses of ACION based on the information available to him at that time. Using TRODAY's Doctrinal process for planning, very similar answers to Custer's tactical problems come to light. The paper also provides the reader with a snapshot of Custer's professional development through his military education at West Point, and through his on the job experience in both the American Civil War, and Western Frontier. The link between his training and experience, and how he prosecuted campaigns against indians is discussed. Current military leaders can gain insight into the challenge of command by seeing today's doctrine applied a historical situation.</p>		
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PREFACE

As a boy growing up in Southeastern Montana, I lived near many monuments to George Armstrong Custer. I was born in Custer County. The Custer National Forest was a favorite hunting and camping get-away, and the towns of Custer, Montana and Custer, South Dakota, are both along highways my family often traveled. The story of “Custer’s Last Stand”, as it was known to me, drew my interest even then.

Having chosen a military history field of study at West Point, I studied the very basics of the Indian wars of the American west and always tied those lessons to where I grew up. As an Army officer, my continued study of military history has lead to many opportunities to evaluate military leaders and their prosecution of campaigns. It is always a challenge to study historical warfighting in the context of modern military thinking.

In this essay I have attempted to recreate and assess the military decisions made by George Armstrong Custer at the Little Bighorn using his training and educational background combined with current doctrinal tools. Without allowing hindsight to enter the mix, it would be hard to make the decisions Custer did if applying modern standards. I believe that through that challenge, today’s military leaders can learn many lessons and better understand the historical precedence of the battle.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Marine Corps University Foundation who funded my research trip to the battlefield; Mr. John Doerner, the battlefield historian at the Little Bighorn National Monument, who dedicated an entire day to my questions and research; Dr. Glenn Robertson of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, who shared resources, and Dr. Donald Bittner of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College who kept me on azimuth.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The Military Decision Making Process and the Battle of the Little Bighorn

Author: Major Jonathan T. Neumann, United States Army

Thesis: Based on his background, education, training, and the information available at the time of his attack, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer made good decisions as he lead the 7th Cavalry in its defeat at the Little Bighorn.

Discussion: Custer received the standard pre-commissioning education that West Point used to mold all future Army leaders. That education served him well in the Civil War where he enjoyed tactical success and a meteoric rise to fame and high rank. Following that conventional conflict, Custer entered into world of irregular warfare and voluntary forces. His defeat at the Little Bighorn ended 10 years of development as an unconventional warrior. Despite the common perception that his decisions invited disaster, by using the current Military Decision Making Process, and the intelligence available to him professionals of today can recreate the command decisions he made that day in June 1876 and possibly conclude that they were not to blame for the defeat.

Conclusion: Custer's military decisions are very similar to those a current leader would make using current military decision making doctrine.

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ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS) THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO ANALYZE THE MISSION ASSIGNED TO LIEUTENANT COLONEL GEORGE ARMSTRONG AND HIS 7TH CAVALRY REGIMENT AT THE LITTLE BIGHORN, AND TO DEVELOP COURSES OF ACTION BASED ON THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO HIM AT THAT TIME. USING TODAY'S DOCTRINAL PROCESS FOR PLANNING, VERY SIMILAR ANSWERS TO CURRENT TACTICAL PROBLEMS COME TO LIGHT. THE PAPER ALSO PROVIDES THE READER WITH A SNAPSHOT OF CUSTER'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HIS MILITARY EDUCATION AT WEST POINT, AND THROUGH HIS ON THE JOB EXPERIENCE IN BOTH THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, AND THE WESTERN FRONTIER. THE LINK BETWEEN HIS TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE, AND HOW HE PROSECUTED CAMPAIGNS AGAINST THE INDIANS IS DISCUSSED. CURRENT MILITARY LEADERS CAN GAIN INSIGHT INTO THE CHALLENGE OF COMMAND BY SEEING TODAY'S DOCTRINE APPLIED TO A HISTORICAL SITUATION.			
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THE MILITARY DECISION MAKING PROCESS AND THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

Project Objective

Military leaders make decisions every day that effect their commands and the lives of the men and women assigned to their organizations. Those decisions are made based on education, training, and experience. The military has developed set processes designed to assist the commander in developing a plan or specific course of action. Current Army doctrine employs such a process or tool, called, the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), “to assist the commander and staff in developing... a plan.”¹

No military decisions are more important than those made in combat. Historians and scholars have analyzed and critiqued the combat decisions of military leaders throughout history, from Hannibal to Schwarzkopf. Commanders who both win or lose battles, campaigns, or wars have their decisions studied and at times questioned. However, commanders who lose in battle often, have their actions examined far more closely and critically². Few commanders in history have been as thoroughly studied and chastised for decisions made in battle than Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer.

On June 25, 1876, as the nation prepared to celebrate its centennial and begin the process of selecting a new president, the Army was engaged in a campaign designed to subdue a non-conforming group of Sioux and Cheyenne Indians on the northern great plains. One clash from that campaign, the battle of the Little Bighorn, saw the defeat of

¹Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army. 31 May 1997) 5-1.

²Classic examples, besides Hannibal, are Napoleon and Lee, both of whom ultimately lost but are considered “Great captains” of military history.

Custer's 7th Cavalry. It rivals Gettysburg, Pearl Harbor, and D-Day as one of the most publicized, studied, and analyzed military actions in American history.

In the history of the nation's battles with its indigenous peoples, the battle of the Little Bighorn is one of the worst defeats the Army suffered. The 1791 destruction of General Arthur St. Claire's expedition against the Miami Confederation, and the 1835 annihilation of Major Dade's column in the Second Seminole War, are two other examples of the cost associated with the manifest destiny of this nation of transplanted peoples.³ While those other two Indian victories have faded from public knowledge (if they ever were common knowledge), the defeat of the 7th Cavalry in Montana remains vivid in America's culture. In his exhaustive character study of the battle, Evan S. Connell writes, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn has been stamped on America with the force of a prehistoric red handprint on a rock."⁴ Military historians have published an exhaustive number of studies examining the Army's conduct at the Little Bighorn, and they continue to do so every year. Even more reviewed is the performance of Custer. As a military commander, he has been labeled heroic, careless, and/or derelict.

This essay will not attempt to re-dissect the battle, or to provide another blow-by-blow account of the Indian victory. Instead, the goal of this work is to focus on the decision-making of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. The intent is to apply all information available to Custer in the context of the U.S. Army's current Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) so as to ascertain what additional courses of action were possible, and validate or condemn his plan and command decisions. Applying a 21st century approach to making military decisions in a battle from another era can assist

³Thomas T. Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars," *Military History of the West*, Volume 24, Spring 1994, 49.

modern military leaders to not only better understand what happened in the fight, but also to attempt to “work the problem” Custer faced without inserting the “20/20 hindsight” that is so common in battle analysis. Developing a course, or courses, of action using modern methods in the context of a historical setting can aid the professional growth of military leaders, and hopefully play a role in preventing future defeats on the battlefield.

In order to better understand what Custer knew at the time he received his orders and began his final mission, the first two parts of this essay will set the stage. Section one lays out the Army’s campaign of 1876 against the Sioux and their allies. Section two is an examination of Lieutenant Colonel (Brevet Major General) Custer’s development as a soldier through his only formal military schooling (at West Point) and his ‘on-the-job training’ received via conventional Civil War operations and through engagements in the Indian Wars which he fought or which were available for him to study. The final section is the development of a plan of attack using the MDMP and only the information available to Custer and his superiors.



George Armstrong Custer as a Brevet Brigadier General at the close of the Civil War⁵

⁴Evan S. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 356.

⁵Public Broadcasting Service, URL:<pbs.org/weta/thewest/people>. Accessed 5 April 2001.

THE CAMPAIGN OF 1876

While the outcome at the Little Bighorn was unforeseen, a decisive battle with hostile Indians was the desired product of a much larger military campaign which would make the Indians comply with recently passed laws dictating reservation life if they refused to go peacefully. Strategically, the U.S. government was determined to use the military to force the non-conforming Indians onto the reservations where agents could monitor them. To carry out this operation, the U.S. Army tasked two departments of the Military Division of the Missouri to field three expeditions in the “theater.” The Department of Dakota provided two columns of troops, one from the west in Montana, and another one from the east in what is now North Dakota. The Department of the Platte provided the third force from southern Wyoming.⁶

The U.S. Army in 1876 had no published doctrine for fighting Indians. Experience shared amongst Army leaders was the way the force developed ways to fight this unconventional foe: “...successful tactical or operational techniques were the product of local individual frontier commanders rather than the army as an institution.”⁷ The Army preferred to see itself as a mirror image of the standing armies in Europe, and preferred to officially prepare to fight the kind of conventional it had against the British in 1812-1815 and against the Mexicans. All this was despite the fact that the vast percentage of its forces was employed in expeditionary duties within the U.S. borders.

⁶Charles M. Robinson III, *A Good Year To Die*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995) 52.

⁷Smith, “West Point and the Indian Wars”, 43.

The method of campaigning against the nomadic plains Indians that had developed amidst the frontier force was to employ several converging military columns in an attempt to force a battle with an enemy that could not escape. The inherent danger of this technique was that coordination between columns was very difficult, if not impossible, and they could be attacked and defeated individually before they were able to converge and support each other in a pitched battle.⁸

The army also tried to fight the elusive Indian in the winter when he was easier to find because his nomadic lifestyle was suspended in favor of prolonged encampments. During the summer, the search for buffalo to hunt and grass for their ponies spurred Indians to remain spread out in small bands and to stay on the move. This seasonal opponent was much harder for the army to find, converge on, and defeat. Winter actions could potentially strike the foe when he was more sedentary and physically weak – and even if he escaped, destruction of supplies and shelter could prove disastrous.

The main Indian force that the 1876 campaign aimed to subdue was a portion of the western or Teton Sioux - Lakota in their native tongue. The term Sioux refers to a common language group rather than a specific body of people. Other Sioux nations are the eastern or Santee Sioux (Dakotas) and the central or Yankton Sioux (Nakotas). Seven tribes comprised the Lakota Nation, the largest being the Oglalas and Brules. The other Lakota tribes were the Miniconjous, Two Kettles, Hunkpapas, Sans Arcs, and Blackfeet. Of these, all but the Two Kettles were united in 1876 in their defiance of white authority.⁹

Allied with the Lakota Sioux, more out of summer convenience than out of any desire to fight the whites, was the northern plains nation of Cheyennes. Ironically, in the

⁸Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941*. (Washington: U.S. Army Center For Military History, 1998), 67.

Cheyenne tribe there were some visiting Southern Cheyennes. The latter had been involved in earlier fights with the Army in other departments, including the Red River campaigns of 1874 and 75, and the Washita River battle (to be discussed in later chapters) against Custer's 7th Cavalry in 1868.

The common cause of bad blood between the Indians and the American government was land. From the first Virginia colonists and the Pilgrims, to the railroaders, ranchers, homesteaders, and miners of the mid-19th century, the concept of outsiders moving in and declaring ownership of the land had always infuriated the Native Americans. The concept of ownership of the earth that sustained their way of life was an alien concept to the Indians. To them, it was as absurd as claiming ownership of the air. The specific land issue that led to hostilities in 1876 was the encroachment of whites into the sacred Black Hills of the Dakota Territory.

The Laramie Treaty of 1868 brought to a close the Bozeman Trail War with the Sioux. The Indians were successful in closing this migration route used by settlers and miners to reach Western Montana. The Bozeman Trail crossed traditional hunting grounds, which were essential to the Plains Indians' way of life.¹⁰ The Sioux were defeated and pushed west in their first war with the whites, which took place in Minnesota and the Dakota Territory in 1862-1864.¹¹ Pushed up against the Bighorn Mountains and their enemies, the Crows, the Sioux would not cede these hunting lands to white encroachment in this second war. Relevant articles and maps of the Laramie Treaty are outlined in appendix A.

⁹Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 4.

¹⁰Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 374.

¹¹A complete story of the first Sioux war can be found in: Robert M. Utley. *Frontiersmen in Blue*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), chapters 13-14.

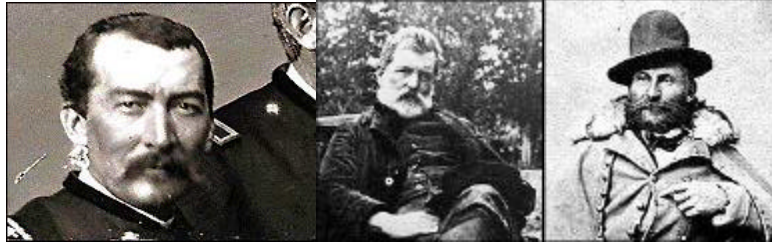
Despite being forever guaranteed to the Sioux through the treaty of 1868, the Black Hills in what is now South Dakota proved too inviting to escape exploration and exploitation. Specifically, an economic depression (The Panic of 1873) forced the government to respond to rumors of gold in the Black Hills. Hence, plans were made for an expedition the next year to map the area and confirm or deny the rumors of such mineral wealth there.¹² While not directly contested, the Black Hills Expedition of 1874, and the gold rush that followed, convinced the Sioux that conforming to white authority and reservation life was a waste of time. Many who resided on the reservation during the winter left in the spring of 1876 to melt into the plains and return to their traditional hunting lands. These “summer roamers” joined forces with those who refused to spend even their winters at the agencies (the “winter roamers”) and formed one of the largest conglomeration of plains Indians ever recorded.¹³

To counter this unauthorized Indian migration, a military campaign was designed in late 1875. General Phil Sheridan, the commander of the Division of the Missouri, devised the strategic objective. Converging columns would find, fight, and defeat the Sioux and their allies. This defeat would force them to return to the reservations.

Sheridan tasked the two departments affected by the Sioux and Cheyenne activities to execute the plan. The two columns from the department of Dakota would be led from Fort Ellis, Montana, by Colonel John Gibbon, and from Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory by Custer. General George Crook commanded a southern column out of Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, provided by his Department of the Platte.

¹²Robinson, *A Good Year To Die*, 33.

¹³John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign, the Sioux War of 1876*. (Fort Collins, CO: The Old Army Press, 1976), 309.



General Phil Sheridan, Colonel John Gibbon, General George Crook¹⁴

Sheridan's specific campaign design was to:

Have in the field a number of columns, so that the moving Indian villages cannot avoid all of them, and have these columns cooperate under some common head (his command in Chicago). Each of them being strong enough to take care of itself, the Indians, if successful in eluding one, will in all probability be encountered by one of the others.¹⁵

In a later message to General Alfred Terry, Custer's superior, he ensured his subordinate understood that the two departments, while participating in the same campaign, were operating independent of each other. The lack of coordinated command and control of the columns in the field, and that fact that he would attempt to command from his headquarters in Chicago, did not seem to concern him. His main concern was finding and striking a concentrated group of Indians as he passed his intent to General Terry:

I will hurry up Crook, but you must rely on the ability of your own column for best success. I believe it to be fully equal to all the Sioux that can be brought to bear against it, and only hope they will hold fast to meet it. You know the impossibility of any large number of Indians keeping together as a hostile body for even one week.¹⁶

In current operational terminology, Sheridan and his subordinate commanders understood that the Indian's center of gravity (the hub of all power and movement, on

¹⁴Public Broadcasting Service, URL:<pbs.org/weta/thewest/people>. Accessed 5 April 2001.

¹⁵Robinson, *A Good Year To Die*, 52.

¹⁶Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 90.

which their very existence depended¹⁷) was the mobility and fighting skills of the warriors of the Sioux and their allies. In conventional wars, the Army had sought to strike directly at the enemy center of gravity like the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia. In this unconventional warfare on the Great Plains, to do this an attack had to be directed where this mobile and elusive enemy was concentrated and most vulnerable. The critical vulnerability of the Plains Indians was their logistical support centralized at their villages. The village would be near the current hunting ground and at a point where good grass and water were available for the vast pony herd. Finding the village(s), defeating their warriors, burning their tentage and supplies, and capturing their horses was seen as the only way to force them out of the vast plains and back onto the reservations.

It was Sheridan's desire that this campaign be executed in the winter. Unfortunately, the winter success upon which this campaign was modeled had been achieved in the Red River area of the more temperate South. (A brief synopsis of The Red River War of 1874 – 75 is in Appendix C .) Winter operations on the northern plains would dictate otherwise. For General Terry's column to even prepare to move from Fort Abraham Lincoln near present day Bismarck, North Dakota, he would have to wait for both the rail lines from his headquarters in St. Paul and the Missouri/Yellowstone River supply line to be clear of ice and snow. Crook's southern column was able to start in March 1876, but the weather, Indian raids on his beef herd, and a botched attack on a Cheyenne village on the Powder River convinced him to turn

¹⁷Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*. Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595.

Center of Gravity is also discussed and defined in Army doctrinal manual, FM 100-5, *Operations*, page 6-7, and in detail in the Marine Corps' *Perspectives on Warfighting* series, number four, by Dr. Joe Strange.

back and wait for better conditions. From this first battle in the campaign of 1876, the Indians now knew that the Army intended to use force to get them to return to the reservation and the fight would occur in their very homes. They began gathering in ever-larger villages for protection.¹⁸

General Terry knew that combating the roving bands of Sioux would require a strong nucleus of cavalry. This force could operate over a vast area for long durations supported by infantry-guarded supply bases established deep within the theater. Just like the Indians, the critical vulnerability of the Army operating on the plains was its logistics. The cavalry nucleus, the campaign's center of gravity in modern military terminology, would be Custer's 7th Cavalry.¹⁹

Custer originally was not only to command the cavalry but also the entire Dakota column.²⁰ To augment his force, Terry added a battery of Gatling guns to the force list. Because Colonel Gibbon's force was predominately infantry based (only four companies of cavalry), his element would be a supporting effort. On February 21st, as his plan came together, Terry reported to Sheridan in what today is called a back-brief:

I think my only plan will be to give Custer a secure base well up on the Yellowstone from which he can operate, at which he can find supplies, and to which he can retire at any time the Indians gather in too great numbers for the small force he will have.²¹

Continued bad weather pushed the Dakota column's start date from the original March to early April and then into May. While the troopers could have set out, their

¹⁸Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 58.

¹⁹Gray, 38.

²⁰President Ulysses S. Grant denied Custer command of the entire column after an incident that will be discussed later in this chapter.

²¹Gray, 40.

supplies did not arrive overland to Fort Abraham Lincoln until April 29th. For Custer, the delay was welcome, for it accommodated his call to Washington to testify in a hearing about corruption in the Indian agency bureaucracy.

Custer's testimony linked the President Ulysses S. Grant's brother, Orvil, to corruption he had seen in Indian Agency affairs. While he did have knowledge about agency graft, some of what he reported to Congress was rumors and could not be verified. President Grant, under fire for corruption in the press as well, interpreted Custer's testimony as a direct attack on his administration. In retaliation, he sent word through the Army commander, General William T. Sherman, that Custer was not to participate in the upcoming campaign.²² General Terry would now have to personally lead his department's forces in the field; however, he successfully petitioned for Custer's reinstatement to command of his regiment only.²³ Terry's petition, endorsed by Sheridan and Sherman, demonstrated the confidence each had in Custer's value during combat.

Despite all the challenges involved, by the end of May 1876 General Sheridan could report that all three columns were finally in motion on their collision courses designed to subdue the hostile Sioux. The columns' movements were, for the most part, uneventful until 9 June when the two elements from Terry's Dakota department met on the Yellowstone River. Then, General Terry and Colonel Gibbon were able to combine forces.

Through a series of vague reports provided by Colonel Gibbon, General Terry surmised that the body of Indians for which they searched was to their south. Gibbon had

²²Jay Monaghan, *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 367.

vaguely reported scout sightings of a village along Rosebud Creek, and Terry decided to have the Powder and Tongue River valleys reconnoitered to eliminate them as possible locations of the Indians before moving against any village along Rosebud Creek. Custer's second in command, Major Marcus Reno, was sent south with six cavalry companies of the 7th to find the Indians' trail.

Gibbon's poor reports were not due to any failing on the part of his scouts. His chief of scouts, Lieutenant James H. Bradley, with a group of mounted infantry and Crow Indian scouts first saw a large Sioux village (estimated at 400 lodges) on the Tongue River on 16 May. (This village was the nucleus of the village attacked by Custer at the Little Bighorn. It continued to grow as more summer roamers and smaller villages joined the gathering.) Colonel Gibbon planned an immediate movement the next day to surprise and attack the Sioux, however difficulties arose. Problems in crossing the swollen Yellowstone River slowed movement, and some Sioux riders compromised surprise. These events prompted him to call off the attack, but Gibbon did not discuss this failed attack in his report to Terry.²⁴

On May 27th, Bradley and his scouts again located the Indian camp, which had moved west to a point along Rosebud Creek. That day Gibbon's entire force was only 18 miles from the hostile encampment.²⁵ After his earlier attempt to attack, Gibbon was content to just accomplish his assigned task of keeping the Indians south of the Yellowstone; he did not maintain contact with the village once he had gained it. Terry

²³Custer was actually the second in command of the 7th Cavalry. The Regimental commander, Colonel Samuel Sturgis, was detailed to St. Louis to head the Mounted Recruiting Service. Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 329.

²⁴Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press. 1991) 156.

²⁵Gray, *Custer's Last*, 157.

would thus have to find it again before he could attack with the combined strength of the two columns.

While Reno worked his way up the Powder River conducting Terry's reconnaissance, it was General Crook's Wyoming column of 15 companies of cavalry and five companies of infantry that next found the trail of Bradley's big village. It had moved further south, up Rosebud Creek. Like Gibbon, General Crook immediately began to reconnoiter and planned to attack the large body of hostiles. On June 17th his command fought the second battle of the campaign. The battle was a tactical draw and Crook was prevented from advancing on the village. He also felt compelled to pull his column back in order to treat wounded and await reinforcements and resupply (they were down to 50 rounds per trooper).²⁶ The Indians' success in stopping one of the advancing columns allowed the Sioux and Cheyenne to move their massive village west to the Little Bighorn Valley. There they could celebrate this victory and prepare for the next fight with these white soldiers or others they suspected were in the area. For the Sioux and Cheyenne this was a great victory and a validation of their ability, as a massed force, to defeat the soldiers in a big battle. Stated another way, they were on a "psychological high."

With the southern column bloodied, the combined forces of the Montana and Dakota columns would play the next major role in the campaign. Terry and Custer's decisions in executing the next battle would forever define the campaign of 1876. Those decisions will be analyzed in chapter four.

²⁶Robinson, *A Good Year To Die*, 149.

Following page: Map of the Campaign of 1876.²⁷

²⁷Michael W. Sarf, *The Little Bighorn Campaign*. (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books Inc. 1993) 68.

CUSTER'S TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

The Military Academy

Contrary to the public misconception that West Point was a school for producing generals or master tacticians, its new graduates were unseasoned and equally untutored in Indian warfare. The institution, focused on the academic demands of engineering and science, did not prepare its young men for the frontier... Nineteenth-century West Point produced excellent nation-builders. It also produced good artillery, infantry, and cavalry second lieutenants, young men who could drill and march, who were familiar with their weapons, who had endured the rigors of the Academy system, emerging with discipline and confidence in themselves.²⁸

A graduate of West Point's class of 1861, Lieutenant Custer reported to the regular army with all the limited military skills and basic academic education that four years at that institution provided. Cadet Custer learned some extra lessons in overcoming adversity at West Point due to the large number of demerits he accumulated (726)²⁹; and a court martial and acquittal - immediately following graduation.

The four years of conventional war against the Confederates would be the only time in Custer's military career when the basic Napoleonic battle drills taught at West Point could be used. The preponderance of his army experience, and that of most 19th century West Point graduates, was spent conducting expeditionary operations against the Indians. The "indoctrination" at West Point provided no preparation to its graduates for frontier duty.³⁰ Instead, it looked to Europe and the nation's two earlier conflicts with Britain and the Mexican War (1848) to form the basis for tactical training.

²⁸Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars", 54.

²⁹Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 107.

³⁰Connell, 274.

52% of all West Point graduates, from the academy's opening in 1802 until the end of the Indian wars in 1890, served on the frontier. In some specific classes, nearly every graduate operated against Indians. 92% of the class of 1837, and 96% of the class of 1872, received service credit for western or Florida service.³¹ Despite the fact that new Lieutenants were pressed to lead in a type of warfare they had not studied, West Point did very little to remedy this situation.

The academy curriculum of the 19th century focused on mathematics, science, and engineering. These were subjects that produced nation builders and conventional soldiers, but leaders woefully unprepared for irregular warfare with Indians. The tactical drill the cadets practiced was the set piece infantry and artillery drills used by all standing armies of the day. (Appendix B contains a listing of the Academy's curriculum from two sampled years).

One benefit, however, resulted from the instructional focus on conventional tactics: most lessons were taught at the company or smaller detachment level. On the frontier, most actions against the Indians were executed by elements that small, so new Lieutenants could be expected to ably function at the head of these independent commands when required.³²

Overall, Lieutenant Custer was as prepared as any newly commissioned officer could be for the upcoming action in the Civil War. It was indeed fortunate that he was actually entering this conventional conflict instead of frontier fighting for which he was far less well prepared. On the eve of his graduation he was confident in his abilities and anxious to be tested in battle. If nothing else, the Academy had instilled in him a

³¹Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars", 27.

³²Birtle, *Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operation Doctrine*, 61.

steadfast dedication to duty and he was ready to do it. He shared this dedication with his family in a letter: “It is useless to hope the upcoming struggle will be bloodless or of short duration. Much blood will be spilled and thousands of lives, at the least, lost... If it is my lot to fall in the service of my country and my country’s rights, I will have no regrets.”³³



Photo of a young George Armstrong Custer while he was a Cadet at West Point.³⁴

Civil War On the Job Training

Within four days of being acquitted of court martial charges and then allowed to depart the grounds of West Point, Custer was in the saddle on a battlefield with his new unit, Company G, 2d Cavalry of the regular Army. In the chaos of that fight, the first Battle of Bull Run, he was cited for bravery for calmly taking charge of a troop movement under fire.³⁵

In early 1862, Custer was put in command for the first time. By default due to the detachment of other officers, the lieutenant was in charge of a company in the 5th Cavalry. While in this billet he executed his first charge against the enemy in a minor skirmish that supported the Army of the Potomac’s move south for the Peninsula Campaign. In the early phases of it he was detached to serve with engineers - and was also selected to conduct reconnaissance from the basket of a hot air balloon.³⁶

³³ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 115.

³⁴ URL:<boygeneral.com> accessed 5 April 2001

³⁵ Monaghan, *The Life of General George Armstrong Custer*, 56.

³⁶ Monaghan, *The Life of General George A. Custer*, 70.

In May of that year, Custer was cited for bravery twice in the same day while participating in action near Williamsburg, Virginia. He was recognized for a daring bridge reconnaissance, and for leading an infantry bayonet charge while still on his horse. During that action he grabbed the first Confederate battle flag captured by the Union Army.³⁷ More important to his development than his heroics, he served alongside Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock. Hancock's calm demeanor in a bleak situation and his willingness to take the initiative without orders was a great leadership example for the young officer in an Army that was struggling to gain an offensive spirit.

While a failure for the Union Army, the Peninsula Campaign continued to be a watershed of experience and leadership lessons for Custer. He spent much of the remainder of the campaign on the staff of the Army Commander, Major General George B. McClellan; he was also promoted to captain. Custer's ability to conduct reconnaissance and give detailed reports helped to save the Army along the Chickahominy River. He also guided two brigades across a bridge to secure the flank threatened by Stonewall Jackson.

In Custer Victorious, Gregory Urwin went to great lengths to describe Custer's admiration, loyalty, and support for General McClellan. He disapproved vehemently when President Lincoln removed his idol from command and his words quoted by Urwin were full of contempt for the President.³⁸ It is ironic that Custer idolized a general who is known throughout history for being chronically hesitant and unwilling to press the attack. McClellan's loyal subordinate has been labeled many things, but never either of those.

³⁷George J.W. Urwin, *Custer Victorious, The Civil War Battles of General George Armstrong Custer*. (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses. 1983), 47.

³⁸Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 49-50.

Diverse assignments, mentorship, and increasing responsibilities continued to present themselves to George Armstrong Custer throughout the war. He served on the personal staff of cavalry corps commander, General Alfred Pleasonton, who used his aide for many important missions; these included a daring raid into Confederate-held territory in May of 1863. Custer's superb performance in this operation and in succeeding ones, including the surprise attack on J.E.B. Stuart's Confederate Cavalry force at Brandy Station, VA, convinced Pleasonton that his young captain was ready for higher command. Custer's "common sense" and "unflagging enthusiasm" for the attack as he took control of regiments or brigades in need of leadership demonstrated that he was capable of commanding a brigade of his own. Hence, General Pleasonton recommended that Custer receive such a command and be made a brigadier general of volunteers.³⁹

Now the youngest general in the Army, Custer was assigned to command a brigade of Michigan cavalry regiments – and took over just in time to play a key role in the Union victory at Gettysburg. Though he was cited for bravery on the second day's fighting there, it was on the battle's last day, while General George Pickett was making his fateful charge at the Union center, that Custer and his brigade fought in a decisive action in the Union Army's rear.

J.E.B. Stuart's Confederate Cavalry conducted a supporting attack designed to destroy the Union supply and communication lines and force. Custer demonstrated his ability to understand how the action to his front supported the Rebel effort and could affect the outcome of the entire battle. Temporarily attached to another division, when Custer received word to break contact and return to his parent unit he recommended to

³⁹Urwin, 54.

his superior that he be ordered to stay and fight because the seriousness of the situation. As Stuart's cavalry attempted attack to the rear of the Union main body, Custer with his brigade attacked their flank and contributed immeasurably to stopping this threat to the Army.⁴⁰

Painting by Don Troiani "Come On You Wolverines"
Depicting Custer and his brigade at Gettysburg on June 3rd, 1863.⁴¹



Both Custer's reputation and professional development continued to grow throughout the remainder of the Civil War. So too did the confidence his superiors had in his abilities. In the winter of 1864 his brigade was sent on a deep raid to Charlottesville, Virginia, in order to open a flank near Richmond and possibly present an opportunity for the Union to capture the Confederate capital. This supporting attack was very difficult. According to author, Jay Monaghan, "Custer was the pawn to be sacrificed" for the chance to take Richmond.⁴² To minimize the risk to his Michigan cavalry, Custer moved the Brigade quickly and under cover of darkness. This 48 hour, 100+ mile raid was executed very successfully with a key bridge destroyed, three mills full of supplies destroyed, prisoners taken, and, most importantly, Custer brought all his men back with

⁴⁰Monaghan, *The Life of General George A. Custer*, 144.

⁴¹URL:<boygeneral.com> accessed 5 April 2001.

⁴²Monaghan, *The Life of General Custer*, 181.

him with only a few slight wounds.⁴³ Unfortunately, while this supporting attack was a success, the main effort faltered on the outskirts of Richmond.

At Yellow Tavern in May 1864, Custer's Brigade participated in the fight that spelled the end for the Confederate cavalry hero, JEB Stuart. One of his Michigan troopers is credited with having shot Stuart, a major loss to Confederate Commander Robert E. Lee since no other cavalry leader was as trusted or skilled as Stuart.

By the fall of 1864, Custer was the commander of the 3rd Cavalry Division and was a major participant in the final offensive in the eastern theater that culminated with Lee's surrender at Appomattox. At the Battle of Sayler's Creek on 6 April 1865, his division captured 31 regimental or higher battle flags. More importantly his command destroyed Lee's supply train of 300 wagons. His opponent on that battlefield was Major General Joseph B. Kershaw, who directed his guns to specifically attempt to kill Custer during the charge in order to slow the series of cavalry successes the Union was enjoying. He was quoted: "I look at General Custer as one of the best cavalry officers this or any other country ever produced."⁴⁴

By the war's end, Custer's reputation with the enemy was something akin to reverence as noted by Steven Gaines, 14th Virginia Cavalry: "Of the cavalry leaders on the Union side I can speak with especial confidence, as to their comparative merits, having met them in more than a hundred fights, and I do not hesitate too say that, in skill and boldness, not one is equal of Gen. Custer."⁴⁵ Besides a reputation, Custer left the conventional battlefield of the Civil War with an audacious offensive style. His next theater of combat, the American Frontier, was to provide many further lessons as he tried

⁴³Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 123.

⁴⁴Monaghan, 245.

to apply that style to Indian warfare. However, his meteoric rise to the rank of general prevented him from gaining the insight that comes with years of campaigning. While he was able to put to use the lessons both taught at West Point and learned on the job during the conventional Civil War, the unconventional warfare of the Indian campaigns would, in many ways, put him back into the student mode.

Development as a Expeditionary Warrior

Following the end of the Civil War, General Custer saw duty with the Army of Occupation in Texas. As the Federal Army downsized, the regular forces were reduced to their pre-war capacities and volunteer forces disappeared along with the associated brevet ranks of those who had led them. Custer thus returned to his official rank of captain and reported to Washington for his first peace-time assignment.

In May 1866, as the Army added new mounted regiments for frontier duty, Custer was given a promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in the regular Army with the newly formed 7th Cavalry. That fall, he headed to Fort Riley, Kansas, where the 7th would be stationed. From there, Custer began a series of campaigns against the plains Indians that would develop his skills as an Indian fighter and an outdoorsman.

Custer experienced his first taste of campaigning against Indians the next spring. In response to attacks on settlers and the crews laying the westward portion of the transcontinental railroad, a campaign was planned for the spring of 1867. Custer commanded the mounted element under his old Civil War mentor, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock.

⁴⁵Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 288.

This operation, which became known as Hancock's War, proved to be very frustrating albeit educational for Custer. His command of eight companies was unable to track and engage any hostiles after they scattered rather than council with Hancock. His troops spent much of the summer force-marching across Western Kansas and Nebraska, and into Eastern Colorado, with almost no Indian contact. Compared to his recent successes in the conventional war against the Confederates, all evidence shows that Custer did not take this unconventional mission seriously. He let weather and supply issues dictate his moves. Custer twice interviewed Pawnee Killer, the Sioux Chief responsible for most of the trouble that summer. He accepted the Chief's claims of no hostile intentions despite all contrary evidence.⁴⁶ Gone was the aggressiveness that had been awe-inspiring to his enemies in gray. Most uncharacteristic was his unauthorized departure from the campaign to meet his wife at Fort Riley. That stunt cost him a year away from his command, the result of court martial proceedings against him. The immaturity he displayed on campaign (most likely a product of his meteoric rise to senior rank) could maybe have been cured during a year of reflection while away from his troops. That opportunity was lost when General Sheridan, who felt sorry for his protégé, allowed him to stay in General Officers' quarters at Fort Leavenworth as a guest instead of in a house-arrest status.

In the fall of 1868, Custer was back in the field with his regiment. That summer, a failed peace treaty with the Southern Cheyenne had accomplished nothing except allow the Indians to draw some rifles and ammunition (designed for hunting only!) from the Indian Agency. Attempts to strike the Indians had failed, and a force designed to protect a railroad crew was attacked and besieged for a week in the Beecher Island (Colorado)

⁴⁶Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier In Buckskin*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 54.

fight. Custer's old cavalry boss, and benefactor the year before, General Phil Sheridan, developed a winter campaign to attack the Cheyenne when they were much less likely to be roaming.

Sheridan's plan called for waging total war against the Indians' villages and supplies. Three converging columns of troops, including Custer and the 7th Cavalry from Fort Dodge, Kansas, would attack into the Canadian and Washita River areas of present day Oklahoma. The Custer of this Southern Plains War resembled the dashing Civil War brigade and division commander of a few years earlier. Acting aggressively, he located the Indian trail in the winter snow and followed it in to the winter village on the Washita River. A simultaneous dawn attack by four components of the 7th Cavalry proved to be the decisive victory Custer and Sheridan desired.

Employing Sheridan's total war mind set, all the warriors were either killed or driven off, women and children were rounded up as prisoners, tentage and food was destroyed, and nearly 900 horses were killed. Under pressure from warriors who continued to fight from a distance, Custer departed with his regiment before nightfall. His departure was timely, because large numbers of warriors from other villages camped up the Washita were preparing to counterattack with a force much larger than his own.⁴⁷ In his book, My Life On The Plains, Custer acknowledges that while he had scored a decisive victory on the Cheyenne village, he had to withdraw his regiment and its prisoners back to his supply train or risk defeat, due to the increased pressure from the ever growing number of Indian skirmishers who flanked the command on ridgelines to either side.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, 67-69.

⁴⁸Utley, 212.

While the Washita fight was a clear victory, a dark cloud hung over its outcome due to the unexplained loss of Major Joel Elliot, the regimental Sergeant Major, and 18 troopers. They pursued an escaping group of Cheyenne, only in turn to be surprised and wiped out by the counterattack force of warriors from the other villages up stream. In his book, Custer reports sending scouts to follow the trail of Major Elliot's force, and that they were unsuccessful. The pressure from gathering warriors on his flanks, and the potential threat to his supply train, caused him to call off the search just before nightfall.⁴⁹ This inability, or unwillingness, to find the missing troopers became a morale issue in the 7th Cavalry as some officers and men blamed their commander for not continuing the search.

Overall, General Sheridan was pleased that his winter campaign had been a success. His faith in Custer had been validated and, according to author Jay Monaghan, he was gushing with pride. "The Army had been frustrated on the plains for three years. Now Custer had led it to victory..."⁵⁰

Custer's next major expedition into Indian country was to escort a railroad survey team along the Yellowstone River in Montana Territory during the summer of 1873. The government's desire to push rails across the northernmost plains, and the Sioux Indians' determined effort to thwart that desire, had resulted in the 7th Cavalry receiving a new posting to Fort Abraham Lincoln near Bismarck in the Dakota Territory.

A Sioux ambush on August 4th gave Custer an opportunity to demonstrate his coolness under fire - and his ability to prevent a bad situation from becoming a disaster. Over 300 warriors ambushed his two lead companies, but his personal leadership placed

⁴⁹General George A. Custer. *My Life on the Plains*. (New York: Promontory Press, 1995), 212.

⁵⁰Monaghan, *Life of General Custer*, 321.

the force into a defensible position where they could withstand the onslaught in a tough three hour battle until a relief column from the remainder of the regiment reached them. Once attacked by this new mounted force, the Indians broke contact and a non-productive chase ensued.

Six days later, the regiment again made contact with the hostiles while attempting to cross the swollen Yellowstone. Attacked on both flanks, and under fire from across the river, Custer employed troops to deal with each threat. Infantry support from the supply train, artillery used to dislodge Indian skirmishers in river bottom underbrush, and cavalry charges against the flanking attacks proved too much for the Sioux. Perhaps even more important is that Custer recognized the Indian bait-and-ambush tactics from “lessons learned” associated with the Massacre of Captain William J. Fetterman (see Appendix C for a brief report on the Fetterman Massacre). He wrote in his official report, “Among the Indians who fought us on this occasion were some of the identical warriors who committed the massacre at Fort Phil Kearny and they no doubt intended a similar programme (sic) when they sent the six warriors to dash up and attempt to decoy us.”⁵¹ Once more Custer had won an Indian battle. In this fight he had commanded about 450 cavalymen against Sioux warriors in excess of 500 (some participants estimated enemy strength at more than double that figure). Newspapers wrote glowing reports of his victories; one even called him the “Glorious Boy”.⁵²

Some take-aways for Custer from these two Yellowstone fights were that the Sioux were gathered in numbers not normally seen, they were aggressively pushing the attack and only broke contact when massed cavalry could be brought against them, and

⁵¹ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 363.

the hostiles were very well armed due to trade goods received at the Indian agencies. Also, the Sioux demonstrated that even with their entire village baggage in tow, they could cross the river with ease - while it had proved almost too daunting a task for the 7th Cavalry.

Custer's prowess as an Indian fighter and the reputation of the 7th Cavalry made it a logical choice to provide security for an exploratory expedition in 1874 into the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota. General Phil Sheridan, the Commander of the Division of the Missouri, envisioned an army fort in that area that "by holding an interior point in the heart of the Indian country we could threaten villages and the stock of the Indians if they made raids on our settlements."⁵³ Such a fort would address the logistical vulnerability of the Army on the plains while providing a jump-off point to attack the Indians support systems so vital to his ability to threaten the whites.

While engineers mapped the area, and accompanying miners tried to validate rumors of gold, Custer enjoyed a relatively uneventful trek. The fact that Indians never threatened the expedition, even though it constituted an invasion of their sacred lands which were guaranteed to them in treaty, could only have further convinced the officers and men of the 7th Cavalry that they were too strong to be beaten. The small amounts of gold found on this two month reconnaissance was enough to trigger a gold rush into the hills the following year - and enflame a dispute with the Sioux requiring Sheridan's campaign of 1876.

In addition to the military campaigns and expeditions in which he participated, several other notable Army – Indian clashes which occurred on the plains were available

⁵²Utley, *Cavalier*, 122.

for study by George Armstrong Custer. However, history has not well documented comments by him about these other Indian battles. As with his understanding of the cause and effect of Indians' defeat of Fetterman's force, it follows that he at least had a familiarity with other actions and took note of lessons to be retained or avoided. Appendix C contains a synopsis of some significant engagements available for professional study during Custer's stationing on the plains and some possible conclusions he might have made.

As George Armstrong Custer received his last marching orders from his Department Commander, General Terry, on the Yellowstone River, he had in a sense been well prepared for that moment. Through four years at West Point, four years of conventional warfare against the Confederacy, and 10 years of service on the Frontier, he had been molded into the best possible cavalry leader for the job at hand. His experiences included the best available opportunities for professional development: formal education at the nation's premiere commissioning source, four years of the highest intensity of combat in the Civil War, and 10 years of assorted military operations (combat, reconnaissance, diplomacy, and law enforcement) in support of national policy in the west. He was a published author, and was considered a subject matter expert on waging war or maintaining a fragile peace with the Plains Indians. All of that development went with Custer as he received his orders and began planning for what would be his last mission.

⁵³Utley, *Frontier Regulars, The Army and the Indian 1866-1891*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. 1973), 244.

THE MILITARY DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Chapter two outlined the campaign of 1876 as it lead to the point that General Alfred Terry felt confident his forces had located the proximate location of the large body of Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. This chapter will analyze his intent for the attack on those Indians, and the planning and execution of his strike force, Custer's 7th Cavalry. For the purpose of this study, the application of current Army doctrine, the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), to the Battle of the Little Bighorn will focus on possible courses of action and key tactical command decision points. The goal is to analyze the decisions of Custer (without the benefit of hindsight) during both the planning and preparation phase, and the execution phase - to provide tactical lessons in unconventional warfare to leaders of today.

FM 101-5, Operations, outlines seven steps for formulating a battle plan using the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP):⁵⁴

- Receipt of Mission
- Mission Analysis
- Course of Action Development
- Course of Action Analysis
- Course of Action Comparison
- Course of Action Approval
- Orders Production

Receipt of Mission: On June 21st, Custer reported to General Terry to receive his orders.

Terry, Colonel Gibbon, and Custer discussed the operation, and they agreed on a two-pronged operation. On the 22d, Custer then received the following written order from Terry:

Headquarters Department of Dakota (In the Field)
Camp at Mouth of Rosebud River, Montana, June 22nd, 1876.

⁵⁴FM 101-5, *Operations*, 5-3.

Liu. Col. G.A. Custer, 7th Cavalry

The Brigadier-General Commanding directs that as soon as your regiment can be made ready for the march you proceed up the Rosebud in pursuit of the Indians whose trail was discovered by Major Reno a few days since. It is, of course, impossible to give any definite instructions in regard to this movement, and were it not impossible to do so, the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will, however, indicate to you his own views of what your action should be, and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see sufficient reason for departing from them. He thinks that you should proceed up the Rosebud until you ascertain definitely the direction in which the trail above spoken of leads. Should it be found (as it appears almost certain that it will be found) to turn towards the Little Horn, he thinks that you should still proceed southward, perhaps as far as headwaters of the Tongue (about twenty miles south of the Rosebud), and then turn towards the Little Horn, feeling constantly, however, to your left, so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southeast by passing around your left flank.

The column of Colonel Gibbon is now in motion for the mouth of the Big Horn. As soon as it reaches that point it will cross the Yellowstone and move up at least as far as the forks of the Big and Little Horns. Of course its further movement must be controlled by circumstances as they arise, but it is hoped that the Indians, if upon the Little Horn, may be so nearly enclosed by the two columns that their escape will be impossible. The Department Commander desires that on your way up the Rosebud you should thoroughly examine the upper part of Tullock's Creek, and that you should endeavor to send a scout through to Colonel Gibbon's Column, with information of the results of your examination. The lower part of the creek will be examined by a detachment from Colonel Gibbon's command. The supply steamer will be pushed up the Big Horn as far as the forks if the river is found to be navigable for that distance, and the Department Commander, who will accompany the Column of Colonel Gibbon, desires you to report to him there not later than the expiration of the time for which your troops are rationed, unless in the meantime you receive further orders.

Very Respectfully, Your Obedient Servant,

Ed. W. Smith, Captain, 18th Infantry

Acting Assistant Adjutant General.⁵⁵

Mission Analysis: Per FM 101-5, Mission Analysis is a multiple step process

that defines the tactical problem and commences the process of determining feasible

solutions.⁵⁶ This analysis of Custer's mission will consist of the higher Commander's

Intent; Specified, Implied, and Essential Tasks; Intelligence Preparation of the

Battlefield; and a Restated Mission Statement.

⁵⁵Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 162-3.

General Terry termed Custer's mission a pursuit. While that indicated his intent for following and making contact with an enemy he strongly believed would break contact and avoid a pitched battle, the more appropriate doctrinal terminology today for the 7th Cavalry mission would be Movement to Contact. By doctrine, Movement to Contact is the offensive operation conducted to develop the situation and to establish or regain contact with the enemy.⁵⁷

Terry's intent also indicated that flexibility, based on Custer's experience and understanding of the immediate situation, was fully authorized. From Terry's original backbrief to Sheridan (page 10) it is understood this intent was for his tactical center of gravity, the 7th Cavalry, to be the main effort throughout this campaign - and he gave Custer the flexibility to carry out that intent. In the commanders' meeting on the 21st, as reported by Gibbon's cavalry commander, Major James S. Brisbin, Terry announced fully that Custer's 7th would strike the blow against the Indians - while Gibbon's predominately infantry command remained further north down the Little Bighorn where a static blocking position could be established.⁵⁸ Lieutenant Bradley, Gibbon's chief of scouts, reported the same understanding: "Terry expected the two columns to reach the Indians at about the same time, but it was understood that if Custer arrived first, he was at liberty to attack *if prudent*."⁵⁹ The fact that Terry offered to further weight Custer with the four companies of 2d Cavalry from Gibbon's column as well as the Gattling battery is further confirmation that his intent was for his main effort, Custer's 7th, to strike the decisive blow against the Sioux, the defeat that would end the campaign.

⁵⁶FM 101-5, *Operations*, 5-5.

⁵⁷FM 101-5, *Operations*, 7-4.

⁵⁸Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 145.

⁵⁹Monaghan, *Life of Custer*, 375. (Emphasis placed by this author)

Specified tasks from the order are:

- Advance up the Rosebud Creek Valley, then down (North) the Little Bighorn.
- Find the Indian trail (essential task)
- Recon Tullocks Creek headwaters and report findings
- Prevent Indian withdrawal via left flank (essential task)

Implied tasks:

- Attack the village if concerned they may disperse or withdraw (essential task)
- Identify and report any signs of Gen. Crook's column
- Pursue the enemy when/if he breaks contact
- Destroy any and all captured Indian supplies
- Clear any and all Indians from the Rosebud/Little Bighorn Valleys up to the reunification with Gibbon's column at the point where the Little Bighorn joins the Bighorn Rivers

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) is the vital step of mission analysis that enables the commander to understand the enemy and the terrain. The doctrinal document that outlines this process is FM 34-130. The three key steps are:

- 1) Define the battlefield or operational environment,
- 2) Identify the battlefield's effects on forces,
- 3) Evaluate the enemy threat.

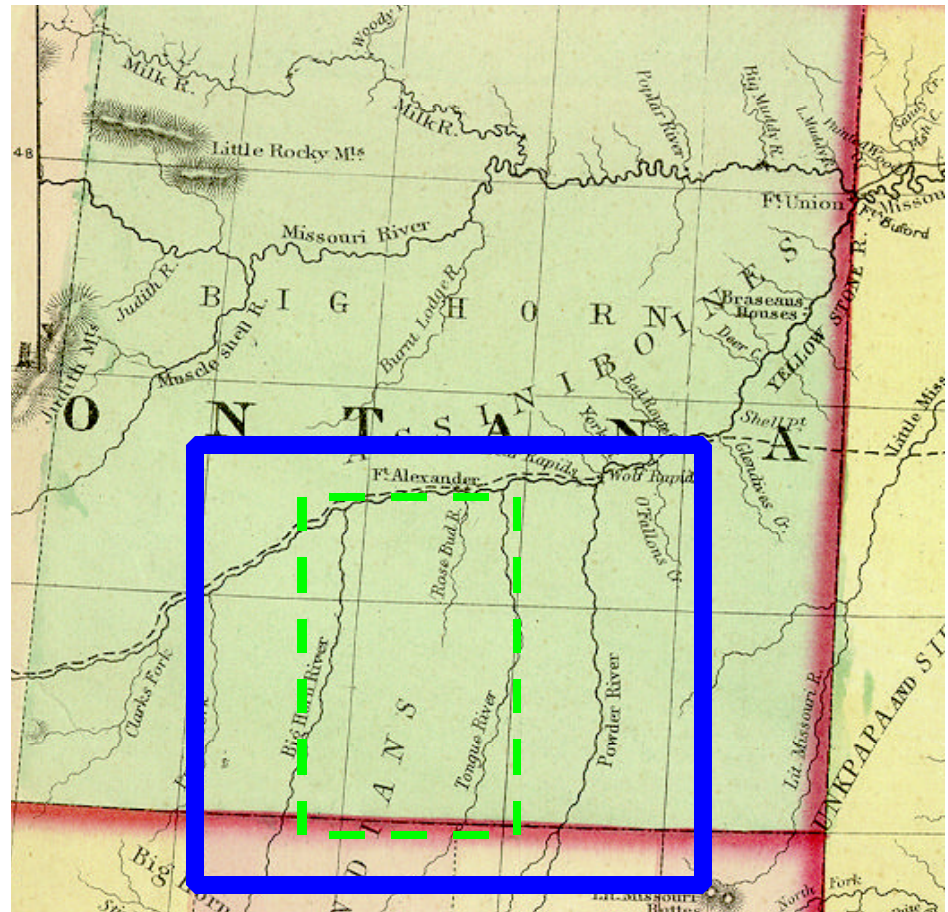
The IPB manual also specifically addresses areas to focus on when conducting attacks or raids in an unconventional conflict such as the campaign of 1876. This section of the manual addresses the challenges of attacking an elusive enemy in hostile terrain while operating away from other friendly units.⁶⁰

Define the Battlefield:

⁶⁰Field Manual (FM) 34-130, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*. (Fort Huachuca, AZ: U.S. Army Intelligence Center. November 1993), 6-12.

-Area of Interest (blue solid lines) for this portion of the 1876 campaign runs from the Powder River in the east past the Bighorn in the west, and from the Yellowstone in the north, to the headwaters of the Tongue and Little Bighorn Rivers to the south.

-Area of Operations (green dashed lines) is the Rosebud Creek and Little Bighorn Valleys. This map, drawn four years before the battle, is



not as accurate as the map used by Terry and Custer. The campaign map of choice was the War Department map of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers and their tributaries, explored in 1859-60, by Captain William F. Raynolds and 1st Lieutenant Henry E. Maynadier. This map very accurately laid out the traces of the creeks and rivers, but was otherwise lacking terrain features. Cartographic works containing terrain relief did not exist.

Besides weak maps, Custer had exceeded the territorial knowledge of his scouts. Before departing the mouth of the Rosebud, he added crow scouts and the trusted guide,

Mitch Bouyer, to his intelligence gathering team commanded by Lieutenant Charles A. Varnum. These new additions, all of whom knew the area well and had scouted for Gibbon's Montana column, would prove much more valuable than his Dakota contingent of Rees and Arikaras who could still read signs and follow trails but were out of their familiar geographical territory. Bouyer and the Crows had been able to guide Lieutenant Bradley from Gibbon's command to within sight of the Rosebud villages earlier, and they would provide the intelligence Custer needed to find the Sioux – but the decision to attack would be his and his alone.

Battlefield's effects: Terrain and weather analysis are listed in appendix D.

Evaluate the Threat (enemy composition, disposition, and strength): Many sources were available to help ascertain how many Indians and what tribes were pitted against the Army in the campaign. Custer first sought Indian strength reports that spring, while in Washington to testify about the agencies. He enquired at the Indian Office in order to learn the estimated strength of the winter roamers, which was said to be approximately 3000 total - about 850 of which he figured to be warriors. He then bumped that number to 1000 fighters and also estimated possibly another 500 visiting warriors from the summer roamers coming out of the agencies who would join the main body.⁶¹ That number concurred roughly with trusted guide Mitch Bouyer's count of over 400 lodge-fire pits in the abandoned village sites (the ratio accepted then was two warriors per lodge).

⁶¹Gray, *Custer's Last*, 208.

Accurate numbers of Indians leaving the agencies should have been available to him from the agents themselves, but they hesitated to report all that left their agency for fear of losing money.⁶² The Custer/Bouyer estimate was most likely short by as many as 400-500 warriors. In Centennial Campaign, author John Gray combined statistical analysis of Indian census numbers from that year and eyewitness accounts by Indian battle participants to arrive at a figure of just under 2000 possible Indian combatants at the Little Bighorn.⁶³ Regardless the actual warrior count, if the 7th Cavalry attacked, the regiment would be badly outnumbered.

That so many bands of Sioux had joined together could not be determined until contact was made and the scouts recognized some specific chiefs or specific tribal dress. Their Cheyenne allies were still considered to be at peace with the government in 1876, although it was common knowledge that they often spent the summer hunting season collocated with the Sioux.⁶⁴

Enemy Courses of Action: No matter the size of the Indian encampment they were tracking, it was still assumed by every Army leader that when attacked the mass of Indians would fight only long enough to secure the withdrawal of their families. They would then disperse and disappear into the Bighorn Mountains (to the Southwest) or into the vastness of the prairie. One available source of intelligence appears to have been ignored by General Terry, and if the information reached Custer it was not recorded. In a letter dated 19 April 1876, Lieutenant George Ruhland of the 17th Infantry, located at the Cheyenne Indian Agency, sent Terry's Adjutant General as complete an intelligence estimate as the column would get from any personal reconnaissance. Through interviews

⁶²Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 263.

⁶³Connell, 346-359.

with Indians visiting the agency, Ruhland reported the general location of the main hostile village (along the Powder and Yellowstone Rivers), its vast size (“about 300 lodges”), and that the hostile encampments contained both Sioux and Cheyenne warriors under Crazy Horse’s leadership.



Crazy Horse⁶⁵

He further reported that the Indians he talked to had fought against Crook’s column at the Powder River on March 17th, and had been coming to that agency in large numbers seeking ammunition. The Indians reported buying arms and ammunition from a group of “Half-Breeds” near the Black Hills, and Ruhland’s drew a key conclusion: the Indians were even more determined to strike a serious blow to the white forces and that their ability to turn back Crook’s column made them confident they could withstand an Army attack.⁶⁶

In his order to Custer, General Terry demonstrated that he was convinced the most likely Indian course of action was a retreat and breakup of the temporary large village: “The problem was to prevent the Indians from slipping away. To them the red

⁶⁴Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 7.

⁶⁵ Many accounts document that Crazy Horse was never photographed, but Indians who knew him verified this photo published in *American Indian Chiefs* by Jason Hook. URL:<Garryowen.com/crazy.htm> accessed 6 April 2001.

⁶⁶ Lieutenant George Ruhland. Report to the Adjutant General, Department of Dakota. Little Bighorn, 03, (National Archives and Records Service Washington, DC)

men were like game – fine game, elusive and dangerous.”⁶⁷ The entire campaign was based on the assumption that the Sioux must be surrounded and prevented from running away.⁶⁸ The Army had to destroy the supplies (the Indians’ critical vulnerability) located at their villages to force them to comply with the edict to return to the reservations. In the execution of this aim, Terry (and Custer) anticipated a battle with the skilled warriors (the Indian center of gravity). That the enemy would be anything but reactive to this cavalry action wasn’t considered.

General Terry’s superior and the campaign’s architect, General Sheridan, from his headquarters in Chicago sent a letter on 29 May 1876 to the Army commander General Sherman stating he was also convinced the challenge would be to find a band to fight. “As hostile Indians, in any great numbers, cannot keep the field as a body far a week or at most ten days, I therefore consider –and so do Terry and Crook – that each column will be able to take care of itself, and of chastising the Indians should it have the opportunity.”⁶⁹ He also states in the letter that he had no real intelligence as to the where the main hostile camp might be which demonstrates a continued lack of disseminating intelligence, and a complete arrogance towards the Indians’ abilities to fight.

The enemy’s most dangerous possible course of action would be a preemptive strike on the supply train of a column, or an attack before the Army expected it and could deploy to fight. The Indians surprised Crook at the Rosebud, and his column (15 cavalry companies and five infantry companies), while not defeated, was stopped from its advance on the Sioux/Cheyenne village. Actually, to Custer, an Indian force with the

⁶⁷Monaghan, *Life of Custer*, 373.

⁶⁸Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer’s Luck*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 243.

⁶⁹Lieutenant General Phil Sheridan. Report to the Headquarters of the Army, Military Division of the Missouri, Little Bighorn, 50 (National Archives and Records Service Washington, DC)

determination to move on and attack an Army column was a course of action not fathomable after 10 years of fighting plains campaigns. In the fight with Crook, the Sioux/Cheyenne alliance committed less than 50% of its combat strength (approx. 750 warriors). Many of the Indian scouts believed the number of hostile Indians was much greater, and that they meant to stay and fight - but the Army leaders gave this thought little attention.⁷⁰

The good quality of weapons carried by the Indians was no secret. Since the mid-1860s, the agencies had been issuing repeating Henry rifles and plenty of ammunition to summer roaming Indians to aid in their buffalo hunts. This hunting produced skilled marksmen who would think nothing of using this white-gifted weapon against the soldiers. In his official report on the battle, written while still on the Yellowstone, Major Reno lamented about the practice,

The harrowing sight of the dead bodies crowning the height on which Custer fell, and which will remain vividly in my memory until death, is too recent for me not to ask the good people of this country whether a policy that sets opposing parties in the field armed, clothed, and equipped by one and the same government should not be abolished.⁷¹

To continue applying the MDMP to the Little Bighorn, the final mission analysis step for this operation is to present the restated mission. Based on what Custer knew and what his boss expected of him, his mission statement could have read:

Regimental restated mission: The 7th Cavalry attacks in zone, 221200JUN76, to locate the hostile main body, defeat any warrior force that opposes us, and destroy the

⁷⁰Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, 244.

⁷¹Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 186.

Sioux village in order to deny them the flexibility of sustaining nomadic life away from the agency.

Course of Action Development is the next step in this modern conceptual process towards a plan to attack the Sioux. Per doctrine, staffs produce multiple courses of action (COAs) to present the commander. These should be several viable options from which to choose in order to accomplish the mission. Each COA must be capable of successfully completing the mission within any constraints from higher headquarters. Each one must also be significantly different from the others in order to be considered a separate COA.⁷² One of the accepted ways to develop different courses of action is through differing task organizations for the unit(s) involved.

General Terry presented four possible force structure courses of action to Lieutenant Colonel Custer when they met on June 21st to discuss the plan of action. From the forces available in the Department of Dakota, Terry offered the Gattling Gun battery and/or the four-company battalion of the 2d Cavalry commanded by Major Brisbin. Custer could add to his regiment with the additional cavalry, the Gatling battery, or both. His final option was to attack with only his 7th Cavalry.

As stated earlier, a movement to contact is the offensive operation conducted to develop the situation and to establish or regain contact with the enemy. The desired result of the movement to contact is to find the enemy, and when the foe is found a hasty attack is the most likely result. Per FM 100-5, "Commanders launch the hasty attack

⁷²FM 101-5, 5-11.

with the forces at hand and with minimum preparation to destroy the enemy before he is able either to concentrate or to establish a defense.”⁷³

Because he was to execute a movement to contact on an assigned axis, Custer’s only key decisions during the planning and preparation phase of this battle centers on the three force structure courses of action.⁷⁴ In a movement to contact/hasty attack scenario, the most important decisions are made during the execution phase as contact with the enemy is made and the situation unfolds.

Course of Action Analysis To provide a commander the necessary information for selecting the best course of action, each COA is analyzed through a war-game process that pits each individually against a model of the most likely enemy actions. Specific events or timings of the battle are examined in order to estimate the outcome of a fight between the enemy force and each particular course of action. A full war game for each course of action is beyond the scope of this project, but a subjective analysis of each can be done based on the assumption that a hasty attack would be resisted only until Indian families’ escape could be accomplished.

Gattling Course of Action: Major Reno took one Gattling gun on his reconnaissance mission and not only was it not needed but it slowed his movement considerably. In the rough country along Tongue and Powder Rivers, Reno had to unhitch the four horses that pulled the gun so that it could be manhandled over rough spots. Unlike Reno’s slow moving scouting mission, Custer’s attacking column would have had to rely on speed at times to close on the Indians, and the Gattling carriages were

⁷³FM 101-5, 7-5.

⁷⁴ For the purpose of this study, any COA involving the Gattling Guns will be considered as a single option since their mobility is the single most important factor in their employment on this campaign.

not designed for rapid movement.⁷⁵ Once the battle commenced, the cavalry anticipated being upon the village so quickly that the guns' fire would become masked (friendly forces in the line of fire) after a very short firing time.

Brisbin's 2d Cavalry course of action: The addition of four more companies of cavalry could have given Custer greater flexibility. Two troop-draining missions that had to be accomplished were security of the regimental mule train, and the left flank screen specified by Terry. Such economy of force use of the 2nd Cavalry troopers would have allowed Custer to attack with all 12 of his 7th Cavalry companies. (It is important to note that by this time General Crook with 15 companies of cavalry, additional infantry troops, and a significant force of Crow Warriors had already been forced to retire by these same hostiles, so 16 companies may not have made a difference for Custer - but he would be on the attack as compared to Crook who lost all initiative when ambushed). A possible disadvantage from this course of action could be the additional supplies needed for four more companies of men and horses but as long as enough mules were available it would have been a minor inconvenience.

7th Cavalry Pure course of action: This course of action provided the least combat power for the upcoming fight. It did maintain a unified chain of command and the familiarity of the leaders would be an advantage. With no additional weapons, troops, or pack mules, the 7th could travel as light as possible, and make time, and Custer would have all his own officers under his command.

⁷⁵Stewart, 246.

Course of Action Comparison The decision matrix is a doctrinal tool to help the commander weigh the information from the COA analysis.

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>COA Gattling</u>	<u>COA 2d Cavalry</u>	<u>COA 7th Pure</u>
Maneuverability	minus	plus	plus
Combat power	plus	plus	minus
Economy of force missions	minus	plus	minus
Pursuit	minus	plus	plus
Familiarity/Unity of command	minus	minus	plus

Course of Action Approval Based on this subjective analysis and comparison, the best course of action for Custer's attack would have been the attachment of the four companies of 2nd Cavalry under Major Brisbin as another battalion with the 7th.

Custer chose to fight with the 7th Cavalry pure. His decision to turn down the cavalry augmentees seems to have been made based on overconfidence in the regiment and the desire to allow the 7th Cavalry alone to shine coupled with a disregard for the enemy's will to fight. During his first officers' call after departing from the Yellowstone and leaving Terry, Custer appealed to their regimental "esprit de corps" in explaining his decision to turn down Terry's offer.⁷⁶ He had supreme confidence in his regiment's abilities and he had bragged before that the regiment could defeat any size gathering of Indians. That confidence and complete disregard of the enemy's most

⁷⁶Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, 255.

dangerous course of action led him to decide on fighting with his regiment alone. The flank security mission specified by Terry would have to be executed by some element of the 7th, thus reducing his combat power.

Decision Points during Mission Execution

The 7th Cavalry's mission was a Movement to Contact. Keys to success in this type of offensive operation are the intelligence gathered on the march and actions taken when contact with the enemy is made. General Terry understood this, and accordingly he gave Custer latitude to use his own judgment as the situation dictated. Doctrinally known as decision points, some of these moments (a specific time or event in the battle) when Custer's judgment would decide the next move of the regiment could be identified during the MDMP process. Others would present themselves during the execution phase of the battle. The decision that a commander has to make at these critical times or events usually determines if the unit continues to execute in accordance with the stated plan, or shifts to a contingency plan designed for a specific but possibly unexpected situation.

Based on the tasks General Terry assigned to Custer in his order, at least two decision points can be determined. Terry stated the first one when he described actions Custer might take when the Indian trail, and the direction it lead, was discovered. A second decision point, while not specified in the order, would occur when and how Custer determined to attack the Indians. That assault was the intended outcome of the entire mission. Another logical decision point, based on Terry's intent to catch the Indians before they knew they were threatened and could disperse, would happen when/if the 7th Cavalry was discovered by the Indians.

The IPB manual describes a graphical method for listing decision points and the actions available to the commander⁷⁷:

<u>Decision points:</u>	Indian trail found	Indian main body (village?) Identified	7th Cav is found by the Indians
Decision Criteria:	Trail leads to Little Bighorn Valley	Indian encampment stationary	Village alerted to cavalry presence
Decision to be made:	Follow to gain location of village? Or continue to march up Rosebud Valley?	How to organize the Regiment for the attack? When to attack?	Indians attempting escape? Attack immediately?

The 7th Cavalry crossed their line of departure on 22 June, and late on the 24th had overtaken the Indian trail and ascertained that it did indeed head toward the Little Bighorn Valley. Along the way, the 7th Cavalry discovered a location where the Sioux had held a sun dance lead by their spiritual leader, Sitting Bull. During his three-day dance/trance ordeal, Sitting Bull is reported to have seen a vision of defeating the white Army. Custer's Ree and Crow scouts interpreted this message in the signs and symbols



left behind.⁷⁸

Sitting Bull⁷⁹

⁷⁷ FM34-130, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, a-13

⁷⁸ Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 267.

⁷⁹ Public Broadcasting System. URL: <pbs.org/weta/thewest/people.htm> accessed 6 April 2001.

Custer's decision at the point where the Indian Trail left the Rosebud Valley and lead towards the valley of the Little Bighorn was to conduct a night march to the divide that separates the two valleys while his scouts got in position to see into the Little Bighorn Valley the next morning. While he did not go on record, it has been reasoned that Custer chose not to conduct the southern swing as suggested by Terry because the Indians were farther north on the lower Little Bighorn (closer to the junction with the Bighorn) than thought when the plan was designed.⁸⁰ Custer briefed his officers that he anticipated resting out of sight on the 25th, and then attacking on the 26th - which was the date Terry anticipated he would be in his blocking position about 10 miles down stream.

From a vantage point called the Crows Nest, the scouts under Lieutenant Varnum were able to see the Sioux/Cheyenne encampment on the morning of the 25th. The operation was unfolding as Terry and Custer had anticipated and all signs pointed to a dawn attack on a sleepy village the morning of the 26th. Unfortunately, the 7th Cavalry hit decision point #3 by midday on the 25th. At least three reports came to Custer of hostile scouts discovering the regiment. His scouts reported one enemy party got within 150 yards of the regiment and sped off towards the village.

While at the Crows Nest to confirm the scouts' report of seeing the village, Custer got into a heated argument with a Crow Scout named Big Belly (also known as Corporal Half Yellow Face). This argument, and Custer's desire to stick with his plan to rest the 25th and assault on the 26th, is recorded in John Gray's Centennial Campaign:

Custer said: This camp has not seen our army; none of their scouts have seen us. Big Belly replied: You say we have not been seen. These Sioux we have seen at the foot of the hill, two going one way, and four the other, are good scouts, they have seen the smoke from our camp. Custer said, speaking angrily: I say again we have not been seen. That camp has not seen us, I am going ahead to carry out

⁸⁰Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 164.

what I think. I want to wait until it is dark and then we will march, we will place our army around the Sioux camp. Big Belly replied: That plan is bad; it should not be carried out. Custer said: I have said what I propose to do; I want to wait until it is dark and then go ahead with my plan.⁸¹ (From this argument Custer's attack plan sounds very similar to the Washita fight where he used the cover of darkness to maneuver several battalions around the village and attacked at dawn.)



View looking West from Reno Hill towards The Crows Nest (arrow). Photo by author

Custer wasn't convinced his unit had been compromised until upon returning to the main body his brother, Captain Tom Custer, reported that a group of hostiles had also been seen in the rear of the column; they were discovered and fired on by some troopers sent back to retrieve lost equipment. Also alarming was the report from Lieutenant Varnum himself that reported a portion of the village breaking up and heading north. (What was actually seen was a smaller village that had camped south of the main encampment and was now hastily heeding the warnings of their scouts.)⁸² It appeared that after months of campaigning in 1876, the grand prize, the chance to strike an assembled large mass of Sioux, was about to be lost. With his education, development,

⁸¹Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 169.

⁸²Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, 276.

and campaign experience all considered, George Armstrong Custer swung his 7th Cavalry into action.

At a hastily assembled officers' call, Custer explained that the Washita-like plan of surrounding the village and attacking at dawn was now scrapped because they had been discovered. The new assault plan consisted of a battalion to secure the left flank as directed by Terry, a supporting battalion attacking directly into the village, and Custer personally leading the five company main effort in a flanking attack on the village from the right. While Custer's concern was that his enemy was about to scatter and escape, in actuality, the assembled mass of 1500 - 2000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were doing just the opposite. They quickly caught their ponies and began to mass to meet the attack.

The Sioux checked the supporting attack lead by Major Marcus Reno, and after a short dismounted fight along the Little Bighorn drove them across the river where they occupied a defensive position on high ground. In its disorganized retreat up the bluff, Reno's battalion suffered nearly 50% casualties. The flank security battalion under Captain Frederick Benteen, reacting to a summons from Custer, arrived just in time to join the defense and save Reno's beleaguered force. Except for one attempt to move a force to locate Custer, this Reno/Benteen element would remain fixed for the next day and a half as it fought to save itself from annihilation.



Captain Benteen and Major Reno⁸³

⁸³URL: <boygeneral.com/reno.htm>

Custer got his first view of the actual size of the massive village from a hilltop that became know as Weir Point. He also saw that the Indians were by no means trying to escape. It was from this vantage point that he sent a message to Captain Benteen to escort the pack train and rejoin the regiment as all companies and the ammunition supplies in the pack train would be needed.⁸⁴ Custer also observed the beginning of Major Reno's attack in the valley floor and saw that it had not been able to penetrate the village.

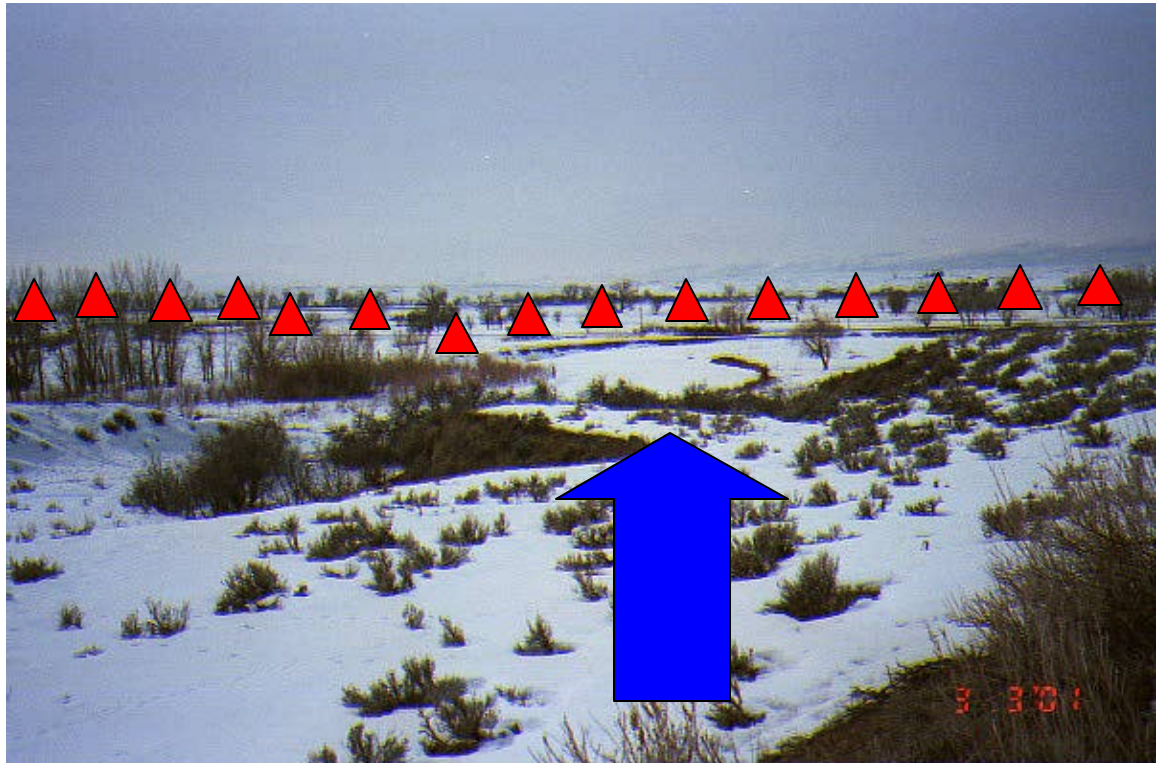


Custer's view of the massive village (red icons) from Wier Point. Photo by the author.

At this point Custer made one of his last tactical decisions. Still working to attack along the west flank of the village he split his battalion to attempt a crossing into the

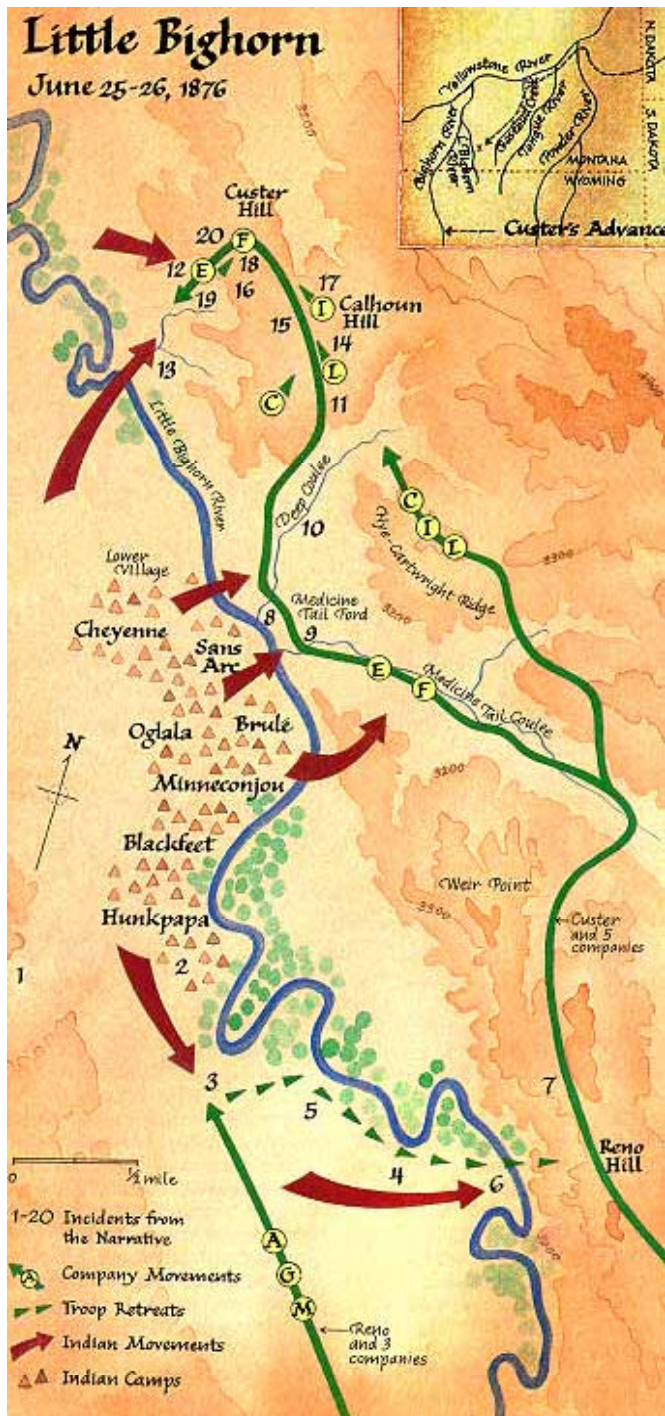
⁸⁴ The story of this last message from Custer has a life of its own and can be read in articles by Colonel W.A. Graham "Come On, Be Quick, Bring Packs." and "The Lost is Found, Custer's Last message Comes To Light." *The Cavalry Journal*, July 1923 and July-August 1942.

village along Medicine Tail Coulee, and to protect the right flank of his force. A two-company force under Captain George W. Yates moved down Medicine Tail Coulee to attack the village where it meets the Little Bighorn River. Custer led the three remaining companies further north protecting Yates' flank and most likely searching for another point to assault the village from.



Yate's (companies E and F) attack (blue arrow) where Medicine Tail Coulee empties into the Little Bighorn. Photo by the author.

This last decision point for Custer most likely demonstrates that he was attempting to execute his plan even though by this time the immense size of the hostile force was overwhelming his force. An element held key terrain on Nye-Cartwright Ridge for some time, possibly awaiting reinforcement from Benteen's battalion. A series of rear guard actions ensued along Calhoun Ridge to keep hostiles off Custer's main body as he continued to attempt to flank the massive Indian village. Overwhelming pressure



map:URL:<the historynet.com/wildwest/images/06962_81.jpg>

forced Custer's rapidly disintegrating force to assemble in a final defensive perimeter on "Last Stand Hill."

The final tactical decision believed to have been made by members of the 7th Cavalry was an "anywhere but here" attempted breakout by the last surviving troopers led by some Non-Commissioned Officers. This small group all died in a scattered trail leading towards the Deep Ravine and the River.⁸⁵



Last Stand Hill as seen from Indian Positions. Phot by the author.

⁸⁵ The last man to see Custer alive was an Indian Scout named Curley who departed the command in the vicinity of Calhoun Hill. All accounts of the actions from that point are based on archeology and Indian

AFTERMATH

Immediately after being relieved by the Terry/Gibbon column, the besieged survivors of the Reno/Bentzen battalions of the 7th Cavalry began to question the decisions of their deceased commander. Those questions would echo across the country to include formal conduct hearings in which blame was passed from any living combatants to the decisions made by the deceased Custer.

Custer did not have the Military Decision Making Process or a battle staff to assist in developing a course of action for this battle. Were he to have it, though, it appears his decisions might have been very similar. The defeat of the 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn can be attributed to the unexpected course of action executed by the Sioux and Cheyenne, and the sheer power of their force which contained at least 25% more fighting strength than ever imagined.

Students of military history will continue to examine and critique the decisions of George Armstrong Custer as they have for nearly 125 years. This paper may provides another tool for that study, especially for military professionals because it applies current doctrine to a historical setting. 20/20 hindsight makes it easy to dissect command decisions, but this work has attempted to re-analyze Custer's mission based only on what he knew and what he was trained to do.

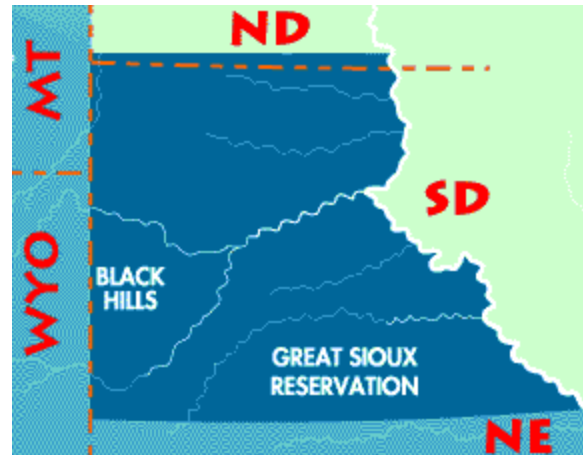
reports. The narrative here comes from Mr. John Doerner, historian at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, interviewed by the author, 2 March 2001.

APPENDIX A: THE 1868 TREATY OF LARAMIE

Enclosed are two excerpts from the treaty that deal specifically with what lands were guaranteed to the Sioux for living and hunting on.

ARTICLE 2. (Reservation Boundaries) The United States agrees that the following district of country, to wit, viz: commencing on the east bank of the Missouri river where

the forty-sixth parallel of north latitude crosses the same, thence along low-water mark down said east bank to a point opposite where the northern line of the State of Nebraska strikes the river, thence west across said river, and along the northern line of Nebraska to the one



hundred and fourth degree of longitude west from Greenwich, thence north on said meridian to a point where the forty-sixth parallel of north latitude intercepts the same, thence due east along said parallel to the place of beginning; and in addition thereto, all existing reservations on the east bank of said river shall be, and the same is, set apart for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation of the Indians herein named, and for such other friendly tribes or individual Indians as from time to time they may be willing, with the consent of the United States, to admit amongst them; and the United States now solemnly agrees that no persons except those herein designated and authorized so to do, and except such officers, agents, and employees of the government as may be authorized to enter upon Indian reservations in discharge of duties enjoined by law, shall ever be permitted to pass over, settle upon, or reside in the territory described in this article, or in

such territory as may be added to this reservation for the use of said Indians, and henceforth they will and do hereby relinquish all claims or right in and to any portion of the United States or Territories, except such as is embraced within the limits aforesaid, and except as hereinafter provided.

ARTICLE 16. (Designated Hunting Lands, and Bozeman Trail Closure) The United

States hereby agrees and stipulates that the country north of the North Platte River and east of the summits of the Big Horn Mountains shall be held and considered to be unceded Indian territory, and also stipulates and agrees that no white person or persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of the same; or without



the consent of the Indians first hand and obtained, to pass through the same; and it is further agreed by the United States that within ninety days after the conclusion of peace with all the bands of the Sioux Nation, the military posts now established in the territory in this article named shall be abandoned, and that the road leading to them and by them to the settlements in the Territory of Montana shall be closed.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Old West Legacy Publishing. URL:<mt.net/~oldwest/LBH/ftlartre.htm>

APPENDIX B: WEST POINT CURRICULUM

Two examples of 19th century curriculum at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

Class Year	Antebellum (1832)	Post-Civil War (1876)
1st Year	Mathematics	Mathematics
	French	French
	Spanish (added in 1857)	Tactics (drill) infantry and artillery
2nd Year	Mathematics	Mathematics
	French and Spanish	French and Spanish
	Drawing	Drawing
		Tactics (drill) infantry, artillery, cavalry
3rd Year	Natural Philosophy (Science)	Natural and Experimental Philosophy (Science)
	Chemistry and Mineralogy	Chemistry
	Drawing (topographic and landscape)	Drawing
		Tactics (drill)
		Military Engineering
4th Year	Rhetorical, Moral, and Political Science	Ethics and Law
	Chemistry and Mineralogy	Geology and Mineralogy
	Tactics (drill) infantry, artillery, (cavalry added in 1849)	Tactics (drill)
	Military and Civil Engineering and the Science of War	Ordnance and Gunnery
		Military and Civil Engineering and the Science of War

Thomas T. Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars," *Military History of the West*, Volume 24, Spring 1994, 35.

While first classmen (cadets in their final year of study) received horsemanship instruction, cavalry tactics were not added until 1849.⁸⁷ This addition was in time to school George Armstrong Custer, but demonstrates that the nation's primary peacetime

⁸⁷Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars", 38.

source for commissioning officers was very slow to adapt to the operational requirements of the American West. On the frontier, cavalry, not infantry or engineers, had become the required force to accomplish the combat mission. In fact, as a result of the Second Seminole War, the academy's board of visitors had begun criticizing the lack of cavalry training as early as 1835.⁸⁸

While the standard curriculum ignored the unconventional warfare being conducted by the Army on the frontier, there were officers on the faculty who had fought the natives and who shared their experience with the cadets. John Gibbon and Richard Dodge were two such Indian fighters who helped mold new lieutenants in the 1850s and 60s. This informal tutelage continued throughout the Indian Wars and mentors included Little Bighorn veteran and Nez Pierce War Medal of Honor recipient Captain Edward Godfrey, who taught in the late 1870s and 80s and was held in awe by his students.⁸⁹

Cadet Custer also found such a mentor in Lieutenant William "Wild Bill" Hazen. A fellow Ohioan who was a decorated hero of the Texas frontier, he taught tactics and became the company commander of Cadet Custer. In Texas, the aggressive Hazen was known for launching violent direct attacks every time contact was made with Apaches or Comanches.⁹⁰ This same bold tactic was to become a Custer trademark in both the Civil War and on the Frontier.

Ironically, it was Lieutenant Hazen who brought the court martial charge against Custer for dereliction of duty in the latter's failure to break up a fight in 1861. While this strict adherence to the rules could be interpreted as an attempt to stop Cadet Custer's

⁸⁸Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars ", 38.

⁸⁹Smith, 46.

⁹⁰Smith, 47.

army career before it started, the Lieutenant gave glowing testimony on Custer's "general military conduct"- which influenced his protégé's acquittal. Custer would soon be wearing army blue and mirroring his mentor's tactics.⁹¹

West Point's unwillingness or inability to address the tactical reality of the military situation on the frontier was somewhat remedied for one four-year span starting in 1836. Following the destruction of the Dade column in the Second Seminole war, Dennis Hart Mahan taught an "Indian Warfare" course - which was one of six Science of War classes senior cadets received in those years. Since 32 West Point graduates died in that war, Mahan's motivation is obvious. He modeled his lectures on lessons from the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, this one course was insignificant in a West Point education with a comparative 112 other lessons devoted to field and permanent fortifications.⁹²

Since the Mahan lectures had ended long before George A. Custer arrived at the academy, he did not benefit from these Indian fighting lessons. Regardless, Custer did avail himself of knowledge of the Native Americans. He even wrote an essay on the history of Indians in North America. In this paper he demonstrated an understanding of the desperation felt by Indians who had to stand by while whites encroached upon and stole their traditional hunting lands. "We behold him now on the verge of extinction, standing on his last foothold, clutching his bloodstained rifle, resolved to die amidst the horrors of slaughter, and soon he will be talked of as a noble race who once existed but have now passed away."⁹³

⁹¹Smith, "West Point and the Indian Wars", 47.

⁹²Smith, 48.

⁹³Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 110.

APPENDIX C: OTHER CAMPAIGNS AND/OR BATTLES AVAILABLE FOR CUSTER TO STUDY

Sand Creek (Colorado - 1864): A dawn attack against a winter village of Southern Cheyenne (ironically the same band Custer defeated on the Washita) was executed with grisly fervor by the 2d Colorado Volunteer Cavalry.⁹⁴ The provocation for this attack is skeptical, and the atrocities committed by the troopers inexcusable - but it did validate the vulnerability of a stationary winter encampment.

The Fetterman Massacre (Bozeman Trail War, Wyoming - 1866): Captain Fetterman and 80 troopers (a cavalry and mounted infantry mix) violated orders and over-pursued a small band of Indians who baited them into a trap. Over 1000 Sioux and Cheyenne left no trooper alive. The loss was blamed on poor weapons (the Infantry had Civil War muzzle loaders, and the cavalry had carbines but no pistols), and the fact that Fetterman's force became separated and could not see or support each other.

The Wagon Box and Hayfield Fights (Bozeman Trail War, Wyoming and Montana - 1867): These two very similar engagements, along with Fetterman's demise, were all part of the campaign to keep the Bozeman trail open from Southern Wyoming to Western Montana. In both engagements, small Infantry forces were attacked while guarding work parties. Success for the Army in each case was partly determined by the effective use of Springfield carbines (instead of the rifled muskets in Fetterman's force).⁹⁵ Massed Indian attacks against cohesive, well disciplined, troopers in a defensible position proved to be doomed to failure. These fights, which occurred in the

⁹⁴Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 295.

⁹⁵Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 124.

same Bighorn River/Rosebud Creek country as the Campaign of 1876, mirrored what happened to the Reno/Benteen battalions at Little Bighorn when they were able to occupy defensible terrain and fight a cohesive defense.

The Beecher Island Fight (Colorado - 1868): A large body of Indians estimated 600-700 strong, pinned down a 50 trooper scouting party on a river island but were unable to complete the destruction again due to a disciplined defense and good marksmanship of the soldiers who were relieved after a week of fighting. Through this battle, and the Hayfield and Wagon Box fights, it seemed that massed Indians, even through repeated charges, were unable to defeat a determined and well-led Army detachment which maintained its cohesion and discipline, no matter the size.⁹⁶

The Red River War (Oklahoma and Texas - 1874-75): The prototype for the 1876 plan, in this campaign General Sheridan employed five converging columns from two different departments (Missouri and Texas) in an attempt to quell an uprising of Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche. While the columns were unable to coordinate many actions, 25 independent engagements with the Indians kept them on the move for almost a year. In nearly every engagement, even the biggest villages of Indians fled from the pressure applied by the cavalry.⁹⁷ While the Army suffered with poor logistics on the dry prairie, the dogged pursuit of the Indians and the systematic destruction of their supplies at every opportunity eventually proved decisive and forced the hostiles to surrender to agency life. Because this campaign was planned and orchestrated by his mentor and benefactor, Sheridan, it is likely that Custer understood at least the campaign's outcome.

⁹⁶Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 148.

⁹⁷Paul I. Wellman, *Death On The Prairie*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1934), 112-125.

APPENDIX D: BATTLEFIELD AFFECTS ANALYSIS

TERRAIN AND WEATHER

By modern doctrine, terrain is analyzed according to the acronym OAKOC, which stands for:

- Observation
- Avenues of approach
- Key terrain
- Obstacles
- Concealment

From Reno's reconnaissance of the area, and over a month on the campaign, an analysis of the battlefield follows. All this information was available or known by Custer.

-Observation on the plains is only hindered by the next ridgeline in any direction.

From these ridgelines, entire river/creek valleys can be seen. Long distance observation is best in the early morning before the heat creates a haze.

-Avenues of Approach are best when following the predominately north-south running valleys of the major streams and tributaries of the Yellowstone River. Cross-compartment travel is difficult due to ridges, creek bottoms, and washouts. Wagons will at times be quite hindered if traveling east to west. Custer correctly placed his supplies in a mule train in lieu of supply wagons. This option is optimal for speed, and only feasible when a mission is designed for a short duration. Water for livestock is only found in the streams.

-Key Terrain for identifying the Indian encampment is the ridgelines separating the Rosebud Valley from that of the Little Bighorn. Indians can be expected to use all high ground for observation as well. Water and best grass for the animals is found in the valley floors.

-Obstacles are the extreme rough areas of the ridgelines. The prairie contains almost no poor mobility areas. River bottoms could be deep and fords are not always readily available; the latter depends on water level and recent rainfall. Major Reno reported difficulty moving a single horse-drawn Gatling gun over the ridges and through rough country during his reconnaissance of the Tongue and Rosebud valleys.⁹⁸

-Concealment is best found by staying off the ridgelines. Some sparse timber in the stream bottoms, but for the most part, the land is wide open.

Weather: (Could not be predicted in 1876, except what was immediately approaching. The Campaign saw snow as late as June 2d, but daytime temperatures were over 100 a week later.) Dry prairie makes dust clouds unavoidable while on the march. Intense heat would take its toll on horses and mules if water was not readily available.

⁹⁸Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 195.

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